

April 25, 2009 - Region's Municipal Officials get Details of Stimulus Package at Murtha Summit

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Larry Stuckslager and George Bozek emerged from a discussion on Friday of the Obama administration's \$787 billion economic stimulus package hopeful but a little worried.

The two township supervisors from Fayette County -- Stuckslager in Jefferson, Bozek in Franklin -- said there seems to be plenty of money and more than enough shovel-ready projects to make the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act a success.

On the other hand, they were concerned about that molasses of the federal government -- red tape.

"We've seen a lot of red tape" in the past, and a repeat now would be deadly, Stuckslager said.

Bozek explained it has taken as long as six years to get sewer and water projects up and running.

"If they shorten that process, the people will see the effect" of stimulus dollars flowing into their communities, Bozek said. If not, it will be just one more opportunity lost.

"The congressman said they are going to do it. I hope so. We'll see," Bozek said.

He was referring to John Murtha, the Johnstown Democrat, who was confined to Washington because of recent knee surgery. Murtha spoke briefly via telephone yesterday to municipal officials and others attending his "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Summit" at Penn State-Fayette, The Eberly Campus.

John A. Hugya, Murtha's chief of staff, said the event brought together local decision-makers and key bureaucrats.

"That (cutting back on red tape) has to be done," Hugya said.

He said officials from the president on down have said it is important to get stimulus dollars pumping into the economy.

"They said they are committed, and we will watch them," Hugya said. "The bulldog will be out."

Yesterday, the federal departments of agriculture, education, energy, labor, and housing and urban development were represented, along with officials from the Small Business Administration and the Pennsylvania departments of transportation and education.

They Power-Pointed their way through the stimulus bill. It might have been a numbing experience except that the audience appeared eager for information.

"This is the most complete information we've gotten," said state Rep. Tim Mahoney, who brought along four aides to help keep track of the dizzying array of programs and dollar signs.

Both Mahoney and state Rep. Ted Harhai said they've been getting plenty of inquiries from municipalities about the stimulus package, particularly for sewage and water projects.

Mahoney said the city of Uniontown has been looking for money to build a \$5 million office building to house a federal agency he refused to name. The South Union Democrat said \$2.5 million in loan money has been pledged by a local bank. That leaves \$2.5 million to raise, and Mahoney said he is almost certain stimulus dollars could help out.

Harhai, a Monessen Democrat, said, "We all have our bad roads and our bad bridges" that could benefit from the federal money.

"None of us knows how well this is going work out," Murtha said of the stimulus package.

But he said it is important to avoid the conditions that prevailed during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the stimulus bill might help.

